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ABSTRACT

The paper reports a pilot study of 280 entering first grade students to try to identify potential handicaps, giftedness, or other special needs. During the preregistration program Ss were given measures of visual acuity, auditory acuity, and language functioning. Language test data allowed the identification of six profile types for further evaluation: speech/language impaired, learning disabled, mentally retarded, children with dialectal variations, intellectually gifted, and normal. (DB)

# THE IMPLICATIONS OF LINGUISTIC PERFORMANCE FOR EDUCATIONAL PLACEMENT OF ENTERING FIRST GRADERS

By Sue T. Hale and Judy West

It is the intent of the authors to relate the construct of human intellect to linguistic performance and to demonstrate that judgments regarding educational needs and placement can be made on the basis of this performance.

The human ability for thinking is referred to be society as intelligence, a nebulous, hypothetical construct designed by humans to explain their own behavior. Presumably the more intelligent one is, or becomes, the more purposeful the behavior that will be exhibited. Theoretically, then, intellect is the intangible element that determines behavior. While a consensus regarding the appropriate definition of the term intellect may never be reached, generally accepted definitions usually include such terms as reasoning, memory, cognition, understanding, and recognition (Thurstone, 1938; Guilford, 1956, 1967; Torrance, 1971). An appropriate conclusion based on these lists of intellectual characteristics would be that mental abilities are reflected in linguistic achievements (Bloom, 1970, 1973; Brown, 1973; Cromer, 1974, 1976).

Throughout the United States, children report to first grade classrooms for reasons based on society's assumptions about six-year-olds and their abilities. In general, a child with a six-year birthday prior to September 1st is assumed to be ready to enter first grade, while a child whose birthday occurs on September 2nd is judged as needing another year of maturity before enrolling in the first grade curriculum. Realistically, educators encounter many children, whether or not their birthdays correspond to September 1st-or-earlier legislation, who lack the intellectual or linguistic abilities for early school experiences. It is important, then, to locate these children as quickly as possible and to avoid early academic failure. Ideally, early identification of academic "nonreadiness" allows individualization of programming in order that every child may



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receive the type of education that is appropriate for his/her specific needs--a program that avoids the negative effect of an endless cycle of academic failure and frustration. It is the premise of this paper that the important task of recognizing individuals who lack the skills defined as academic readiness may be identified based on their linguistic performance prior to entering first grade.

In the Lafayette County Mississippi Schools during the academic years 1978 and 1979, a pilot study was initiated to determine if individual differences could be identified prior to school enrollment which would assist the school system in appropriate placement and programming for entering first graders. A total population of 280 students was examined during the study. Three parameters of behavior were selected for examination by speech pathology interns (under the supervision of a certified speech pathologist and the school nurse) during a pre-registration program: (1) visual acuity; (2) auditory acuity; and, (3) language functioning. The tests of sensory adequacy were administered in order that faulty learning due to the maintaining factors of poor vision or hearing loss could be eliminated to the extent that was possible. Follow-up evaluations prior to the outset of the school year were obtained for those who failed to perform normally in these areas. These follow-up evaluations were conducted by optometrists, ophthalmologists, otologists, and/or audiologists, as was considered appropriate based on the test findings. Fitting of corrective lens or hearing aids and/or enrollment in programs of aural rehabilitation were used as indicated with these children. Tests of language functioning focused on the child's facility with the linguistic variables of content, form and use. A screening procedure which included examination of receptive and expressive, vocabulary, correct use of the sound system of English, appropriate selection of grammatical markers and rules, and adequate use of language as a social tool was employed.

Results of the pilot study were considered positive in that the data suggested that judgments could be made in regard to subsequent first grade groups based on the

test results. These were:

1. Children with sensory problems could be identified early and receive treatment prior to enrollment in school. Facilitative learning environments could be constructed as needed and resource or classroom services specific to the children's needs could be anticipated.
2. Children with language deficiencies could be categorized in specific disorder groups with recommendations for follow-up evaluations. Suspected problems could then be ruled out or special resource or classroom placement could be made on the basis of more indepth testing.
3. Children with intact sensory and linguistic systems could be judged ready for first grade placement without further evaluation.
4. Children with exceptional performance in linguistic functioning could be referred for testing and placement in programs for the intellectually gifted.

The results of the study revealed that specific profiles could be identified based on language test data.

a. speech/language impaired--These children presented difficulties with specific aspects of linguistic functioning. Children who needed further evaluation by the speech pathologist in the use of speech sounds, grammatical markers or rules, and social aspects of communication were identified.

b. learning disabled--These children's performance on the screening test was characterized by marked differences between specific skills. Primarily, they presented high/low profiles of skills underlying language content, form and use. For example, their performance on sections measuring vocabulary may have been adequate or greater than normal, while their facility in selecting grammatical markers and/or rules may have been significantly below their expected level of competence. Another common

finding related to this exceptionality was that of inconsistent mis-articulation of speech sounds. Children presenting one or both of these characteristics were referred to the speech pathologist for further evaluation and to the local survey committee at the end of the academic year to determine the need for further academic testing.

c. mentally retarded--Children in this area of suspected exceptionality demonstrated an overall delay in all areas of language development. Typically, they were reluctant to speak, exhibited numerous articulation errors, failed to demonstrated an appropriate understanding of the task(s) required, and had reportedly failed to reach developmental milestones on schedule. These children were immediately referred to school personnel. Testing was accomplished during the summer months prior to enrollment in first grade.

d. dialectal variatons--The language tests which were administered necessarily examined linguistic performance from the standpoint of the use of the arbitrary code of Standard English. Based on the test data, two groups of children who presented dialectal variations were identified. The first group was comprised of children who used a dialectal variation which conformed to the language of their speech community. In other words, the children learned the rules of their peers in an appropriate fashion, and this rule system (and its variations from Standard English) could be identified from the test data. These children were considered to be ready for the usual first grade experiences, and teachers were instructed to be sensitive to the code differences between the school and home environments. The second group presented some dialectal variations considered typical of their speech community, but they also exhibited faulty development of speech sounds or rules apart from those which would be predicted by the language of their home environment. These

individuals were next evaluated as though they were speech/language impaired.

e. intellectually gifted--These children presented superior profiles in all areas of language development. Generally they presented sentences that were markedly longer or contained more complex syntactic structures than their peers. Their vocabulary was judged to be superior and their use of language was more refined. These children were referred for testing to determine the need for special resource classes for the gifted and/or advanced grade placement.

A summary of the data resulting from the pilot study can be found in Table I.

Table I. Children identified by language screening test as needing further services and those later diagnosed for placement in exceptionality groups.

| Diagnostic Category | Identified by Test | Later Placed in the Diagnostic Category | Over-referred |
|---|---|---|---|
| a. speech/language impaired | 24 | 21 | 3 |
| b. learning disabled | * | * | |
| c. mentally retarded | 10 | 8 | 2 |
| d. dialectal variations + other speech/language problems | 21 | 14 | 7 |
| e. gifted | 6 | 4 | 2 |
| f. normal (no services--includes normal dialectal differences | 219 | 233 | |
| TOTAL | 280 | 280 | |

This study demonstrated the relationship between linguistic functioning and academic achievement. While this method tends to over-identify suspected speech/language and other academic problems, it ensures that all children in need of further evaluation and subsequent placement are referred.

The primary advantage of this system is that children are identified and evaluated prior to the beginning of first grade. Appropriate placement decisions can be made and children with special needs can begin receiving individualized instruction on the first day of their school experience.

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